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New Leaders in Seoul Exploit General Yearning for Stability

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SEOUL—Chin Soon Ja, a 35-year-old shopkeeper, is of two minds about the wave of purges, arrests and more subtle forms of repression that have swept into every corner of life since the South Korean military established itself in absolute power last May.

People are frightened by the arrests and what she describes as "invisible pressures" exerted by the government, she says. But uppermost in their minds, she thinks, is a desire for economic stability after nearly a year of turmoil and the advent of a severe recession. Her sales are down 40 percent from a year ago and have been declining for months. "Actually, ordinary people do not care much about politics," she adds. "What we want is a better living."

The belief that what Koreans want most is a dose of stability seems to be widespread. It is a theme on which the new government plays skillfully to justify its tactics. For many average South Koreans, it has a ring of

truth and helps them to swallow the bitter political pills.

Their response calls to mind the haunting phrase Walter Lippmann once used to describe the acceptance of fascist governments in depression-ridden Europe during the 1920s and 30s. The people accepted shackles on their wrists, Lippmann wrote, to keep their hands from shaking.

For thousands of citizens, of course, there has been no choice. Thousands have been designated "hooligans" and marched off to reeducation camps. Thousands of government officials, from top bureaucrats to lowly tax assessors, have been purged. Rich people are being forced to give up their fortunes and businesses required to fire or demote persons whose views are unacceptable.

Most respond with quiet resignation. One prominent professional man sat recently in a Seoul restaurant and described his fate. He had worked hard all his life, rising from a poor family to attain national prominence in his profession. He had been privately critical of the new government but by no means an enemy of the state.

His employers were forced to seek his resignation, he explained, but were able to soften his punishment by transferring him to a less important position. Throughout the dinner, he cast wary glances over his shoulder and fell silent when waiters hovered nearby. What would he do with his life now? "From now on, I shall keep a very low profile," he said.

The low profile is the solution of many. Dissidents who once sought out foreign journalists to advance their causes now do not return telephone calls. Those who do give interviews are swarmed over later by investigators who want to know what the reporters sought to find out.

Government surveillance and attempts at thought control were facts of life under the rule of the late president, Park Chung Hee. What is different now, under Chun Doo Hwan, is the systematic character of the intrusions. Especially in its later years, the Park government exhibited a somewhat erratic and bumbling approach to keeping citizens in line, which many mocked. Nobody mocks the cold efficiency of the Chun era.

An example is the new application to have influenced Park's daughter is of one of Park's favorite exercises, the

belief that under Park's waning rule, a sense of corruption had come to pervade South Korean society, encouraged from the top by greedy businessmen and favor-selling bureaucrats.

"Park had a soft spot for those around him," said one highly placed official, "and did nothing to punish them."

Even popular music has not escaped. Twenty-four top entertainers have been banned from television and radio, their careers in ruins, for what the newspapers described as "their indecent personal lives and debased singing." At the top of the list, ironically, was a pop singer, Sim Su Bong who had been one of Park's favorites and in whose arms Park reportedly died after being shot by an assassin in a dining hall last October.

No longer. The Ministry of Home Affairs has announced that precisely 32,504 social leaders will undergo the spiritual renewal lectures. No one doubts that they will go. The chilling thought is how the government decides that exactly 32,504 people need their spiritual life and devotion to country revitalized.

The purges, arrests, and other reprisals have extended into every segment of Korean society and have ranged far beyond the political enemies who once went in and out of Park's jails with a revolving-door regularity. Several of Park's own cronies have fallen victim to Chun's purges and even one eccentric mystic thought

"It's a good thing for a lot of people to see them clean up on the hoodlums and street gangsters," said Kim Young Gil, a 41-year-old taxi driver.

"The question is, how long the drive can go on before many of them come back to resume their business."